

## *In the suburbs, activists are 'fed up'; Those seeking change find it tough to connect with regional politicians*

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### **Body**

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The call to defund police was heard loudly at the Mississauga rally over the fatal shooting of Jamal Derek Jr. Francique. It came again at the Malton protests over the killing of Ejaz Choudry. And it reached another peak in Oshawa after the verdict in the beating of Dafonte Miller.

For years, the GTA's regional police forces have been largely unchallenged by activism, but a series of high-profile cases of police violence have created a new hot spot for the North America-wide movement for radical police reform - police in Peel and Durham regions are now facing the same urgent calls for defunding and radical change seen in Toronto and elsewhere.

In the 905, that movement is up against its own particular challenge: regional government. In 2020, activists and community members in the suburbs around Toronto say they're struggling to connect with the regional politicians who oversee the suburban police forces - politicians who, the activists say, have scant experience with activism and are doing little to meet the demands of the public. Meanwhile, those politicians say their hands are tied by the fact the overwhelming majority of police spending goes to staffing, meaning any cuts would lead to fewer officers on the street.

Increasingly, activists are "fed up with everything," said Shailene Panylo, an organizer with Durham Black Accountability Commission. "Everyone is tired of things we can't control, of things being done wrong - and they want to do something."

Unlike in Toronto, where city council - and your local councillor - has a say in police funding. In the 905, it's the regional councils made up of regional councillors and mayors that determine the overall budget. And the fine details of the budget are discussed and brought to the upper-tier government by the local police board, a much smaller body made up of a few regional politicians, mayors, police chiefs and representatives of the public appointed by the provincial government.

"It's not a city council decision, which is quite different than the Toronto model," explained Kevin Ashe, the chair of the Durham region police board and a regional councillor for Pickering.

Hence, getting a message to the actual decision-makers is not as simple as sending your local councillor an email.

Police account for the largest single chunk of regional budgets in three of four GTA regions outside Toronto. In Durham that amounts to around \$220 million annually; in York it's \$348 million, and in Peel it's \$446 million. These figures are all around 30 per cent of the total budget - money activists say could be spent on social services, public health and transportation. (Halton is the anomaly, with a police budget of just \$170.6 million, or around eight per cent of the region's total municipal spending.)

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The layers of government make it "very difficult to connect" with the politicians who matter, said Yasmin Dini an activist with the Peel Girls Empowerment Movement and Climate Justice Peel, who says she was frustrated trying to get residents' voices heard at a Peel police board meeting late last month.

The meeting received nearly 100 deputations from residents - the most ever - calling for defunding and opposing the plan to deploy body cameras, which activists say will only increase police spending.

"Body cameras will not address issues of discrimination, prejudice and devaluing of people," wrote Mississauga resident Sara Lopez, in an emotional letter. "I don't want to fear for my loved ones anymore."

"If the leaders of Peel honestly want to support the safety of all its residents, they must immediately start the work of defunding the police force," wrote Mississauga resident Melanie Amber Warren.

But the board didn't read out the deputations at the meeting; in the end, it both rejected calls to defund the service and moved to expedite the plan for body cameras.

"This is the only way for us to connect with the board, and make our voices heard," Dini said. "People feel ignored."

Peel, of all the GTA police forces, is facing particular scrutiny after several recent interactions between officers and racialized residents have turned deadly. Choudry, a 62-year-old father of four who lived with schizophrenia, was shot following a mental health crisis call in June. In April, an officer fatally shot 26-year-old D'Andre Campbell, who had been struggling with mental illness. And in January, Peel police fatally shot Jamal Derek Jr. Francique, a father of two.

Including these cases, Ontario's police watchdog, the Special Investigations Unit, has been called in to investigate six separate incidents this year in which a Peel officer has shot someone. The latest came early last week in Brampton.

As with any SIU probe, public details on these cases are scant until much later in the investigation, but one theme of the anger has been over the response to mental health crises, as in the Choudry and Campbell cases.

At the board meeting, Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie - one of seven board members - called for a rethink of how the service should respond to such calls.

"We need to explore models where we are less reliant on police to respond to mental health-related calls," she said in a statement. "We must also explore changes to the Mental Health Act that would allow first responders other than the police to apprehend individuals in distress." (Crombie did not, however, call for any cut to the police budget.)

Earlier this year, Peel police followed Toronto police in launching a Mobile Crisis Rapid Response Team that pairs specially trained officers with mental health crisis workers to respond to mental health crises. For now, that team is small, with only two units on the road from noon until 2 a.m. each day, and at a cost of less than \$1 million, it's a fraction of the overall cost of policing.

In Durham, Panylo said some progress is happening, if slowly. A petition set up by Durham Black Accountability Commission, which has collected nearly 15,000 signatures, is calling for divesting 10 per cent of police funding to be invested in community-centred alternatives, a chance to review a line-by-line budget, and the assembly of a certified mental health and crisis intervention team.

Panylo said the group has also secured endorsements from the local councils of Oshawa, Whitby and Ajax to approach regional government with the recommendations from the petition in July.

Late last month, Durham Regional Police Chief Paul Martin was questioned by regional officials about racism in the organization and their use of force. Martin, who last week announced his retirement, said he was committed to implementing changes to root out racism and making the force more equitable, including compiling race-based data for all interactions between police and the community; inviting community members to participate in recruitment and

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promotion reviews; and undertaking an internal census to identify areas of concerns and disparity around inclusion in leadership, promotions and career opportunities.

On defunding, Ashe, the Durham board chair, said the challenge for politicians is trying to balance activists' demands with increased police work. "We have to have an adult conversation around what policing is now, what it should be, what should be changed," he said, noting that in 2019 Durham police responded to more than 102,000 calls, including 312 in which officers used force to a degree that met the threshold for reporting.

Given that about 80 per cent of the police budget is used to pay salary and benefits, it's very difficult to slash a big chunk of funding, he said - "if reductions are made to cost, that means less police officers."

Ashe said there also must be "adult conversations" about questions such as: Do all need police officers need guns? Are there better non-lethal options? What's a better mechanism to deliver mental health services to those in distress?

"These are all questions that we should be open to as civilian oversight governors, and police unions should embrace as well, to see if there is a better way," he said.

"The residents that we represent want police to be responsible, they want them to be respectful and they want them to be reflective of our diverse communities."

With files from DurhamRegion.com

Jason Miller is a Toronto-based reporter for the Star covering crime and justice in the Peel Region. His reporting is funded by the Canadian government through its Local Journalism Initiative.

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